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AUTHOR Fortuna, Carolyn
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a unit of instruction about media images--how they work, ways they affect people, and means to use them--in which young adolescents learn the consequences of becoming a media-literate consumer. The paper explains that in the unit, divided into 2 "clusters," 110 Boston-area eighth graders share 5 core academic teachers: math, science, world language/language enrichment, social studies, and English. It notes that, because each cluster's common curriculum planning time is limited to once per 6 day cycle, consensus is built into interdisciplinary design when an instructional leader drives the unit through initiating one-to-one personal meetings, sending e-mails, and drafting lesson plans. According to the paper, both clusters came to agree that an interdisciplinary mass media day assists the students to rise in a "gestalt" to become more complete critical thinkers, since discussion of media images engages the cerebral cortex, activates thinking processes, and generally results in conscious recognition and evaluation of persuasive media intent. The paper suggests that educators need such a bridge to enhance reading, writing, speaking, listening, and understanding and thus, media interdisciplinary lessons became integral to helping young adolescents begin the leap to formal operations development. The paper details the means used to assess the students' media analysis skills. It also states that the unit addresses Massachusetts content standards in all academic areas through four essential media literacy concepts: (1) messages are constructed; (2) messages are representations of the world; (3) messages have economic and political purposes and contexts; and (4) individuals create meaning in media messages through interpretation. (NKA)

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Creating Critical Media Analysis Skills

By Carolyn Fortuna

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English

(91st, Baltimore, MD, November 15-20, 2001)

From sitcoms to docudramas to music videos to commercials, a media-literate person understands the complex array of techniques behind media messages. In this unit of instruction about images--how they work, ways they affect us, and means to use them for our own purposes--young adolescents learn consequences of becoming a media literate consumer. Because it is imperative to step back and distinguish information from entertainment and persuasion, media-literate students realize the connection between consumerism and cyclic changing trends, becoming people who read, view, listen, and interpret messages critically: society's good decision-makers.

The targeted eighth grade students under discussion in this article live in a Boston outlying suburb. With 350 housing starts in each of the last five years, the town has undergone a population surge and shift to increased social, ethnic, and economic diversity. Divided into one of two "clusters, 110 students share five core academic teachers: math, science, world language/ language enrichment, social studies, and English. Educators' collective goal is to meet various learning styles inherent in a

heterogeneous class population. Realistically, clusters are in transition as faculty resigns, our building is renovated around us as we teach, and our principal explores new pedagogical philosophies. Yet, all academic teachers from both teams participated in the unit.

My enthusiasm about media literacy instruction was garnered initially from media guru Dr. Renee Hobbs and revisited during each of four years of implementation. Because each cluster's common curriculum planning time is limited to once per six day cycle, we build consensus into interdisciplinary design when an energetic instructional leader (in this particular case, me) drives the unit through initiating 1-to-1 personal meetings, sending e-mails, and drafting lesson plans. Both clusters came to agree that an interdisciplinary mass media day assists our students to rise in a gestalt to become more complete critical thinkers, since discussion of media images engages the cerebral cortex, activates thinking processes, and generally results in conscious recognition and evaluation of persuasive media intent. Educators need such a bridge to enhance reading, writing, speaking, listening, and understanding, and, thus, media interdisciplinary lessons became integral to help young adolescents begin the leap to formal operations development.

Moreover, what better method could educators harness to grab middle level students' attention in all academic classrooms than media literacy instruction? Students of both genders gravitate to this unit because it utilizes the same ubiquitous technologies that they seek outside school, and it facilitates social interaction and cooperative enterprises due to shared personal, world, and learning experiences. Further, since young adolescence is an emotionally complicated time when children

break away from parents to establish an identity unique to them, the media serves as a primary influence for young adolescents' personal and consumer decisions. It is a filter from an insulated community to an ultra-modern world, initiating new possibilities of "Me". The media assists young adolescents to gather enormous amounts of information and to create lifestyle choices *without* adult input and guidance. Based on my students' responses, only 30% of their parents/ guardians ever point out inappropriate programming, and only 16% talk about commercials' content. Only 23% discuss images of media violence. Only 34% of students ever watch public television. Marshall McLuhan said that the medium is the message, and now this unit takes it a step farther: the message is the medium in a world where distance between advertising and entertainment is gray.

Back in the English classroom, reaching to blend engaging *and* effective instruction, I facilitate both a Pre-Assessment to identify what students already know about media persuasion and a Survey of Student's Media Habits that requires parent/ guardian input. An on-going Vocabulary Search Quest with eventual Quiz leads to Literature Circles (Daniels), where, in homogenously leveled reading groups, students analyze Non-Fiction Media Articles. Additionally, each student chooses a reading-level appropriate Novel that was later produced as a Film, writing a Book Review based on a Voices in the Middle model and Analyzing the Film version via the PIPER Method (Point of view, Inferences, Persuasive techniques, Evidence, and Relevance), in a subsequent Venn Diagram, each student compares the two genre presentations.

Additionally, students collaborate in heterogeneous teams of four to distinguish documentaries from docudramas through a series of short lessons such as "The Impact of

Camera Techniques” and “Music and Emotion.” Each team celebrates individual strengths with a culminating Documentary Storyboard Presentation. All watch select clips from family television shows and advertising productions, again comparing findings to the unit’s Essential Media Literacy Concepts. They engage in a day of rotating academic activities, titled *Body Image* (science), *Calculating the Cost of Smoking Versus Other Leisure Activities* (math), *Internet Hoaxes* (social studies), *Sports Personalities in Magazine Advertising* (language enrichment), *What’s Real About Reality Television?* (English), and *International and American Magazines and Newspapers Compared* (world language). Parent/ guardian volunteers, solicited at open house, assist in the classrooms to run activities, facilitate discussions, and serve refreshments.

As the Final Performance Task, each student creates four frames that are filmed as a 30-second Public Service Commercial. The students variously study and/or utilize computers, digital cameras, sound recording equipment, a karaoke machine, printing, layout, special effects, lighting, and methods of enhancing message delivery. Each class is invited to create its own Scoring Rubrics, and students, parents, and other community members assess the presentations on a real-time basis. All students engage in a Post-Assessment and write a Self-Reflective Essay describing life-long lessons learned.

In a fine lens, Mass. DOE Content standards in all academic areas are addressed through four essential media literacy concepts: a) Messages are constructed. (b) Messages are representations of the world. (c) Messages have economic and political purposes and contexts. (d) Individuals create meaning in media messages through interpretation. Three essential media literacy questions are posed during activities: (a) How does the media influence and shape our lives? (b) Does the media reflect society or

does society reflect the media? (c) What is the long-term impact of a culture saturated by consumer images? The range of assessment moves along a continuum, including checks for understanding, traditional quizzes, observation/ dialogue, open-ended prompts, and performance tasks and projects. They vary in scope, time frame, and structure; are valid and reliable measures of the targeted understandings; provide opportunities for students to exhibit their assimilation of knowledge through authentic performance tasks; and offer sufficient and varied information to support inferences about each student's understanding.

Last year's end-of-the-unit learning curve for these students as compared to a control group of other eighth graders in the same building (the retiring teacher declined to participate) demonstrates substantial accommodation of media persuasion techniques: understanding the genre, factual knowledge, program authorship, point of view, purpose, audience, missing facts, authenticity of the message, image, sound, and language, comparisons between media, and enhancing authority of message.

As William Glasser suggests, students need to be inspired by topic and style; then opportunities for engagement and meaning making are maximized. Creating Critical Media Analysis Skills is the means to that end.